

MORE GOOD NEWS ABOUT PARROTS!

Critical discovery of Yellow-eared Parrot

by PAUL SALAMAN AND BERNABÉ LÓPEZ-LANÚS

In the twentieth century, we have witnessed declining wildlife populations of many species sensitive to landscape changes by humans. Of 353 species in the charismatic Parrot family, 30 percent are threatened with extinction, with one of the most endangered members being the Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* from the South American Andes.

At the turn of the century this magnificent parrot was documented as being 'abundant' in mountain forests over a vast area of the northern Andes. The Yellow-eared Parrot depends on wax palms - the world's tallest palm standing 40 meters tall - for nesting in their trunks, roosting on fronds at night and feeding on its fruit.

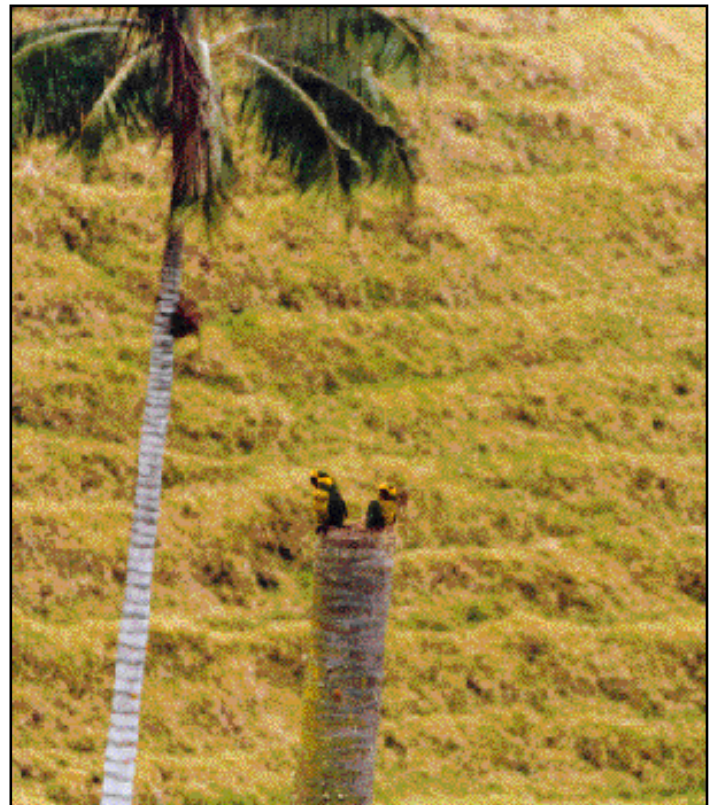
However, by the 1980s it was clear the population was catastrophically declining, as large flocks disappeared at an alarming rate. By 1991 only two flocks were known to survive, numbering fewer than 50 individuals in locations in Colombia and Ecuador.

Unlike most species of parrot, the Yellow-eared Parrot has very rarely been kept in captivity, and was represented only by two single birds. Presently none is known to survive in captivity. Effectively, the two flocks contained the entire global population and it was clear that without immediate conservation action, extinction was imminent.

Forest Area Purchased

By the mid-1990s, researchers in Ecuador with Loro Parque Fundación purchased and protected a stand of palms and forest used for breeding by the last dwindling flock in Ecuador, yet the birds appear not to have bred in several years. In 1997, a flock of 24 Yellow-eared Parrots were observed in a historically well-known location in the Cordillera Central of Colombia. As a result, 'Proyecto

Ognorhynchus' was instigated in Colombia by Paul Salaman and Niels Krabbe with Colombian and international support and financial aid. By June 1998, field surveys by Bernabé López-Lanús commenced to locate and protect the Yellow-eared Parrot, as well as mounting a sustained regional and international publicity campaign for the species. However, after 11 months of intensive searches over suitable areas of the Colombian Andes the parrot had not been located.



This nest, the only one known, contains at least one chick. Photo: Bernabé López-Lanús

Parrot Awareness Campaign

A regional parrot awareness campaign with posters was undertaken with Proyecto *Ognorhynchus* by Corporación Regional Autónoma del Quindío (CRQ) and help from Corporación Regional Autónoma del Tolima (Cortolima). This campaign proved fruitful when Alonso Quevedo - a Colombian fieldworker studying the endangered Mountain Tapir (also dependent on the fallen

fruits from wax palms) - reported a flock of 20 Yellow-eared Parrots on 13 December 1998. This report was forwarded to Bernabé López-Lanús and follow-up investigations ensued.

Two Flocks Discovered

Official permission was granted to Bernabé and his assistant Julián Peña to visit the area from 18 April 1999. That same day, Bernabé witnessed a scene he thought 'science fictional' -

flying over wax palms and forest were two flocks of Yellow-eared Parrots, together totalling 61 birds in a remote location of central Colombia. No sooner had he discovered the flocks and where they roosted, but Bernabé found a nest site with a chick bird being fed by adults. After 11 months searching, Bernabé's dedication and enormous effort finally paid off. This is a phenomenal multiple discovery that exemplifies the area's importance for *Ognorhynchus*, and doubled the known population of the species. Over the course of the next week, Bernabé established a wealth of information, including:

- The active nest site has at least one chick, which is protected and fed by the parents and several 'helpers'. The nest site is being monitored continuously by Bernabé and Julián.
- The species nests and

roosts in wax palm stands.

- A communal ritual was witnessed daily in the afternoon - whereby a flock visited a dead wax palm and all gnawed on the dry trunk. This behaviour is probably associated with bill sharpening and/or gleaning minerals.
- Local campesinos (mountain farmers) provided an extensive list of tree species which *Ognorhynchus* feeds on, which includes palm fruits as well as various other tree fruits present in the area.
- Campesinos in the study area were conservation-minded and did not hunt or collect *Ognorhynchus*.

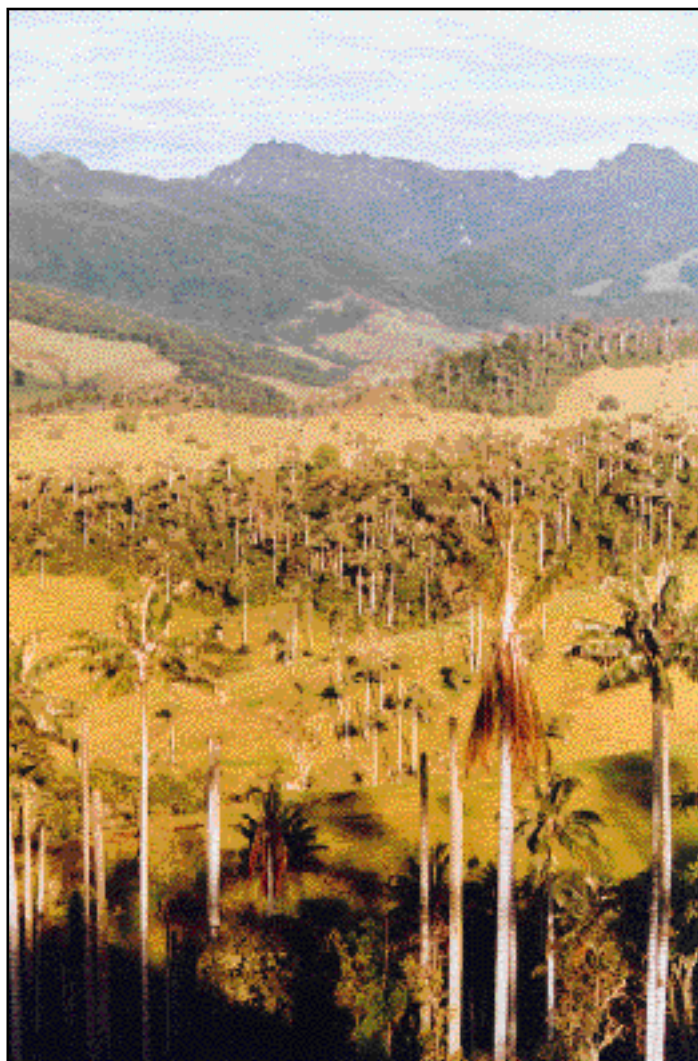
A Critical Moment For The Species

This remarkable discovery comes at a critical moment



Yellow-eared Parrot (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*)

Photo taken by kind permission of R. Low & R. & V. Moat from *Parrots in Aviculture*



The spectacular wax palm habitat of the Yellow-eared Parrot.

Photo: Bernabé López-Lanús

for the species. Whilst 61 individuals represents the largest flock recorded in recent decades, the worrying aspect is that only one pair out of a possible 30 appears to be breeding. This is obviously not a sufficient rate to provide any optimism for the species' long-term survival. Furthermore, mounting threats in the form of hunters, illegal parrot collectors, and forest clearance continue to threaten the species. Its survival is dependent on the goodwill of local rural farmers and communities not to hunt or collect the species as pets. Fortunately, Proyecto Ognorhynchus has the enormous co-operation and enthusiasm of campesinos, local communities and regional government agencies, so that a long-term conservation

action plan to protect and assist the species' survival can commence quickly.

Can This Parrot Be Saved?

The race is on to save the Yellow-eared Parrot and ensure its place with us in the twenty-first century.

Proyecto Ognorhynchus is funded by Loro Parque Fundación, Zoologische Gesellschaft/Fonds für Bedrohte Papageien and American Bird Conservancy with World Parrot Trust and Barbara Delano Foundation, and supported in Colombia by Sociedad Antioqueña de Ornitología.

For further information check: www.proaxis.com/~salaman

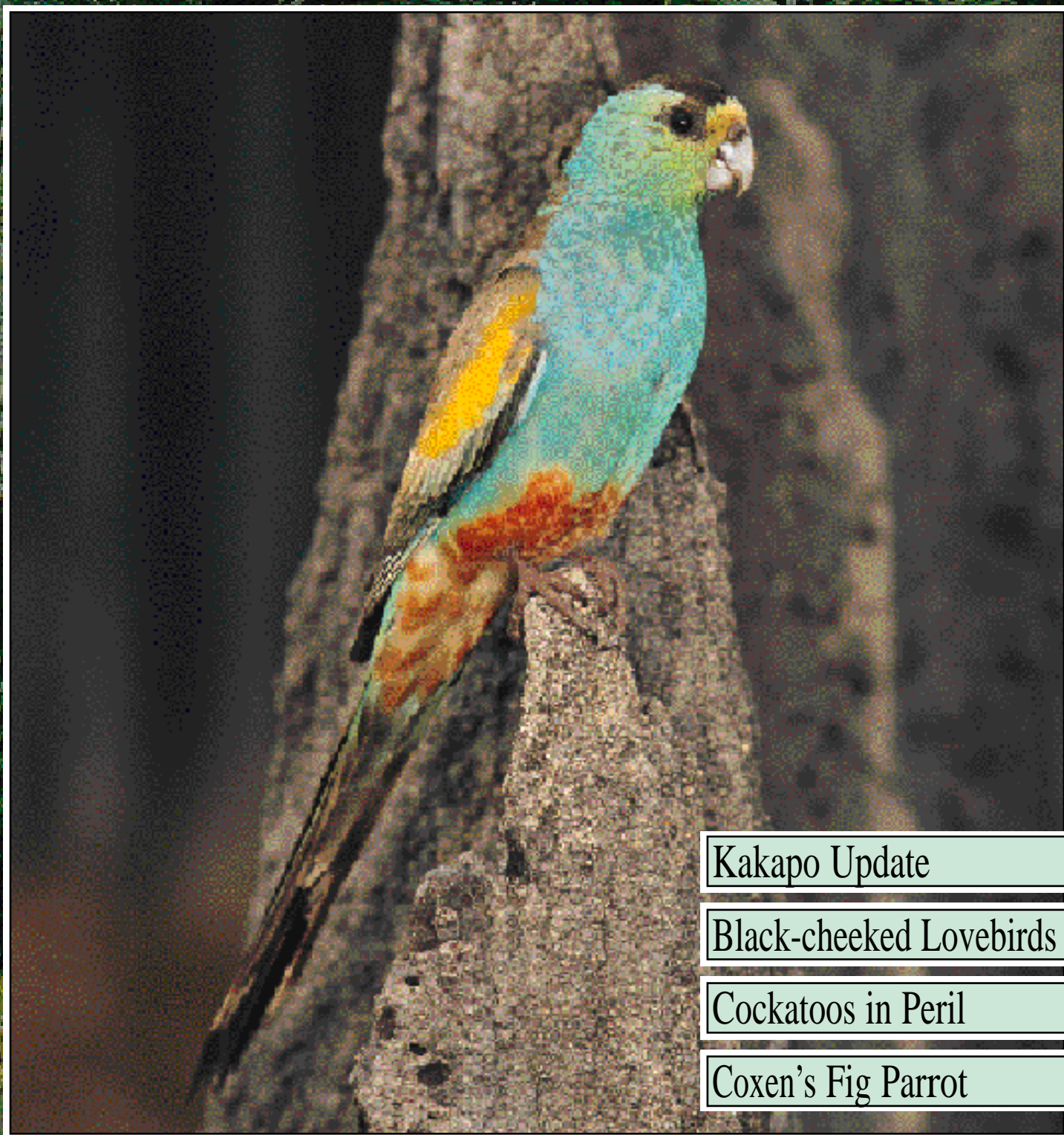
PROMOTING EXCELLENCE
IN PARROT CONSERVATION
AVICULTURE AND WELFARE

World Parrot Trust
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Vol. 11 No.2 May 1999

Psitta



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psittacine (sit' ə sîn) belonging or allied to the parrots; parrot-like